Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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War for the Profit of Industry

Renato Giovannetti

The posters with large lettering and flashy colours, generously applied to the walls of the city—and with no respect for the aesthetic sensibilities of others—announce each day to the cultured and illustrious that in one of the countless movie theatres that afflict the City, films of the war in Libya are being shown. At first, they dealt with episodes of life in the field; with images of landscapes that the pens of war correspondents had already depicted, scenes of the new, unique, and varied existence that people are living down there. And everything was going well: the new institution of the cinematograph had, even with its defects, some value. The value, for example, of making us live for an instant with our faraway brothers, of making that land which smiles at us and attracts us with the fascination of a grandiose and glorious mirage, seem close to us. And the public flocked to it. And pretty much all of us—both those who typically frequent the cinematograph and those who do not—would go to get carried away and to dream.

But unfortunately, after the happy times came the dark times. The cinematographs found themselves with a distressing scarcity of subjects: the public isn’t so interested anymore in films about the war. That is only because it has seen the same scenes shown hundreds of times: the only variety lies in the name of the production house or in the ability of the camera operator. It was necessary, therefore, to find something new to pique the public’s curiosity and to electrify the audience. Those few metres of film were worth their weight in gold: it was a big business opportunity that couldn’t be missed. Wars don’t happen every day and you have to know how to take advantage of them.

And so, they settled for the next best thing.

Wouldn’t the audience have been happy to watch their dear soldiers in action? To sit comfortably and watch a skirmish, or better yet, a battle? But filming the actions of war is not possible: above all because the bullets have no regard and no respect for cameramen. And one’s own skin is a precious thing, even more precious than money. So then people thought: if you can’t capture real battles, let’s make some fake ones! A fake war! What a great idea!

Then came the first timid attempts. Where do we find the actors? That’s easy: our very own soldiers, there, on location. Those brave young men
kindly lend themselves to the filming during their resting time, between
gunshots and a march! Then we had—artificially—the patrols through
the oasis, the assaults on suspicious houses, and so on... But then, even
that wasn't enough. They manufactured battles: the most glorious names
of those conflicts in which Italian blood consecrated the new fate of the
homeland were profaned by these strange comedies, to which our good
soldiers—with an innocence that can only come out in their favour—lent
themselves. The industry presented these comedies to us, and continues to
present them to us preceded by the most bombastic titles in which all the
inevitable rhetoric of these months reappears in front of us, peppered with
the grammatical errors of hack writers used for such a task.

An advance towards the enemy? Here is a battalion of our brave young
men passing in front of the lens, most likely at a run. The battle? Here are
their soldiers behind the trenches pointing their rifles toward the enemy,
who no one dreamed would appear that day. And the charge? There is
this, too: at any given moment, our young men hurl themselves out of the
trenches and pass in front of us, running. What more do you want? You want
to see if the enemy—who we never see—is really there? If our men fall from
their shots? Three or four men are kindly asked to throw themselves on the
ground for a moment and to have one of the Red Cross soldiers—who is
standing at the ready off to the side, waiting for the right moment—to come
and collect them. And then, the icing on the cake: the orchestra that plays
patriotic marches and maybe even the large drum that acts as a cannon
complete the miracle! The public rushes in, the cashbox fills up, and the
war for the profit of industry becomes as lucrative a speculation as ever.

Is there among you, oh readers, someone who has had the good fortune
of NOT witnessing an indecorous spectacle of this nature? It is not likely.
But if that someone does exist, he would not believe our words at all and
he would think that we were imagining things. And yet, this is the pure,
simple, and painful truth.

Who is to blame?

Our brave soldiers who make themselves available? Heavens no! How
would you like these innocent kids to know that their innocent manoeuvres
will be passed off tomorrow as a bloody battle? They are proud and happy
to think that tomorrow their bold cheerfulness and their youthful swiftness
will appear on the white screen back home like a salute and a heroic
promise. They laugh merrily and joke around innocently while, without
knowing it, they lend themselves to the profit of speculators.

Is it the fault of the authorities who permit this? We sincerely do not
think so. In times like these, whoever zealously and steadfastly contributes
his own efforts toward the greater purpose does not have the time to laze about in the shadows of a cinema.

Is it the fault of the public who does not rebel against this? Just imagine! However true or false the battles may be, the ones carrying it out are still our brave, heroic soldiers who, with songs on their lips, will tomorrow go off to get killed in the name of the homeland! How can you want the public to rebel, if it could seem that even those who are now at the top of our thoughts could be included in that disapproval.

It is this money that succeeds in silencing in some people even the most noble sentiments: love of country, for example.

And we would not make a big deal, pitying these amoral people, if we did not have to consider that these films are also shown abroad: and abroad, one can always find people willing to laugh at our expense.

It is solely for this that we hope that this disgrace ceases: for the dignity of our glorious army; for the dignity of the homeland, which is on the road to a greater destiny; for the dignity of ourselves, who today more than ever feel proud to call ourselves Italians.

‘La guerra applicata all’industria’, La Vita (4 June 1912), p. 3. Translated by Siobhan Quinlan.